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VIA EMAIL

San Antonio Express-News Editorial Board

Among the questions facing San Antonio during our Tricentennial year, is the question of public space. While much attention is currently focused on the future of Alamo Plaza, in the city's historic Westside the public has been fenced out of Guadalupe Plaza for nearly two years. We remind the City of its responsibility to care for and maintain public spaces in all of our communities.

In August of 2016, a "temporary" 6-foot tall chain-link fence appeared around Guadalupe Plaza barring public access to this public space. There is no record of a permit for this fence, and indeed, City officials have told us that the fence was erected without City approval. Yet it remains in place.

We are told that the Plaza was fenced due to loitering, drug use, and crime in the Plaza. Based on arrest statistics available via SAPD's website we refute the claim that the Plaza was besieged by crime. However, we do have concerns about the Plaza.

Guadalupe Plaza was created in 1984 to serve as a public space for community events held by area businesses, churches, and community organizations. For many years, that was the Plaza's function. Sadly, over the last few years, programming in the Plaza has significantly declined so that it has often been inactive for long stretches of time. Organizations who used to hold events at the Plaza have cited significant increases in rental fees and dirty and inaccessible restrooms as reasons for moving events elsewhere. We believe there is a connection between the absence of scheduled programming, high rental fees, dirty bathrooms, and perceptions of loitering, drug use, and crime in the Plaza. Most importantly, fencing the Plaza addresses none of these issues. It masks them while denying the public use of public space.

Our opposition to the fencing of Guadalupe Plaza centers on three major concerns: 1) that the health and wellbeing of the community are not being adequately addressed; 2) the closing off of precious public space; and 3) the criminalization of low income communities. All of these point to severe resource disparity in San Antonio. Can you imagine Main Plaza being fenced off for two years due to a perception of crime?

We are deeply troubled to think that whereas in other communities City officials would take immediate, concrete actions to combat problems like crime, drug addiction, and park maintenance with real solutions, in the Westside we are offered a fence – something that does nothing to confront these challenges. Furthermore, in this political climate, building fences to keep people of color out of a public space smacks of a blanket condemnation of our community. Everyone deserves access to public spaces, not just the privileged.

Plazas are a feature of Texas' built environment that date back to the Spanish era. Guadalupe Plaza is special in that it is a 20th century incarnation of this tradition that is both culturally appropriate and sensitive to the community's need for public space. To our knowledge, no Spanish-style plazas in Texas are enclosed by a fence as they are by definition open spaces. We believe that fencing off Guadalupe Plaza betrays its cultural heritage as a community space.

We are neither oblivious, nor unconcerned about the issues of drug addiction and criminal activity perceived to be present in the Plaza, but fencing this public space does not address the problem. We call upon the City to take responsibility for Guadalupe Plaza. Take down the fence, reduce its rental fees, and activate the space with programming. Then, we believe, many of the Plaza's perceived problems will be greatly reduced. The fence only further promotes the pernicious stereotype that the Westside is not safe and adds to the false perception that poverty equates criminality. Ultimately, the fence reifies and applies the specious national discourse to the local level – that Westside residents are all “bad hombres” – a characterization we resoundingly reject.

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On behalf of the Westside Preservation Alliance